

Indonesia: Land rights activists record 241 agrarian conflicts in 2020, land theft rampant

Monday 8 February 2021, by [RAMADHAN Ardito](#) (Date first published: 6 January 2021).

Ardito Ramadhan, Jakarta — The Agrarian Reform Consortium (KPA) recorded 241 cases of agrarian conflicts in Indonesia throughout 2020.

KPA Secretary General Dewi Kartika believes that the large number of conflicts is an anomaly because it occurred in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic which resulted in an economic recession and restricting people's movements.

"When there has been negative national economic growth and also the implementation of PSBB [large scale social restrictions] which restricted people's movement, including space for the movement of investment and capital, in fact large scale land theft in 2020 did not decline", said Kartika during the launch of the KPA's 2020 annual report on Wednesday January 6.

Kartika is of the view that the Covid-19 pandemic should have also put the brakes on agrarian conflicts because of the decline in economic activity.

Because, said Kartika, with an economic recession investment plans and business expansion go on hold and should make companies restrain themselves by increasing business efficiency.

Based on the KPA's records, the total number of agrarian conflicts in 2020 did indeed decline compared with the previous year, but the decline was not equivalent to the decline in economic growth.

The KPA also recorded that agrarian conflicts in the plantation and forestry sector actually increased by 28 percent and 100 percent respectively compared with 2019.

"We think this anomaly is quite strange because in fact business expansion, the expansion of capital, much of it has happened in sectors which need land on a large scale such as plantations and forestry", said Kartika.

According to Kartika, companies have in fact taken advantage of the pandemic to carry out business expansion in rural areas because the situation there is not as bad as in urban areas which have been worn down by the pandemic.

"As a consequence, agrarian based companies are still free and increasingly free to move, this is the reason why during the pandemic rural areas are still a big target for the expansion of investment and accumulation [of capital] by groups belonging to large scale corporations", said Kartika.

Based on the KPA's data, most agrarian conflicts which took place in 2020 were in the plantation sector with as many as 122 cases. This was followed by the forestry sector with 41 cases,

infrastructure 30 cases, property 20 cases, mining 12 cases, military facilities 11 cases, coastal areas three cases and agribusiness with two cases.

Meanwhile if looked at in terms of land area, there were 624,272.711 hectares of land which was subject to agrarian conflicts, while the number of victims of agrarian conflicts stood at 135,332 families.

The KPA also highlighted cases of violence in areas where there were agrarian conflicts. Kartika said that dozens of people were assaulted or killed for defending their right to land in 2020.

“There were 19 people who were assaulted in agrarian conflict areas, and unfortunately, these conflicts again resulted in the loss of life, there were 11 farmers in rural communities who died defending their right to land”, said Kartika on Wednesday.

Kartika said that this was ironic because in 2020 experienced difficulties as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic creating an economic and healthcare crisis.

“It turns out that social distancing or PSBB doesn’t apply in impeding violent conflicts. So social distancing, PSBB, also wasn’t effective in containing violent and repressive methods of handling agrarian conflicts on the ground”, said Kartika.

Kartika also regretted that the government has failed to respond to the victims of violence during agrarian conflicts.

Based on the KPA’s records, cases of violence in agrarian conflicts in 2020 also involved the security forces, with the police involved in 46 cases, the TNI (Indonesian military) in 22, Public Order Agency officials (Satpol PP) in nine and security personnel or thugs hired by companies in 20 cases.

In addition to this, the KPA said that 139 people were criminalised during agrarian conflicts in 2020.

“There were several instruments or old methods that were most often used to criminalise farmers, traditional communities or fisherpeople fighting [for their rights], including the Income Tax Law, the Plantation Law, the Criminal Code, the Mineral and Coal Mining Law and the Biological Resources Conservation Law”, said Kartika.

Ardito Ramadhan

Translated by James Balowski

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